

So. Cal. Jewish Historical Society

LOS ANGELES LABOR HISTORY TOUR

The Harbors and Free Speech

The port communities of San Pedro, Wilmington and Long Beach have a long and colorful labor history, full of free speech battles and Red Squad assaults. At a small dirt cliff in San Pedro that became known as Liberty Hill, Andrew Furuseth and others organized sailors, longshoremen and migrant roustabouts at the turn of the century. IWW agitators were already speaking at Liberty Hill only two months after the union was founded in 1905. During the Red Scare after World War I the militant Marine Transport Workers Federation also organized there.

A fight against the open shop tied up 90 ships in 1923 and led to the mass arrests of the Battle of Liberty Hill (see below).

9 Liberty Hill. 5th and Harbor, San Pedro.

The hill was levelled by urban renewal, but a plaque is planned. Many free speech battles occurred here from 1905 to the 1920s during IWW challenges to police power. In 1923 Upton Sinclair came to address maritime strikers, and he and 600 others were hauled off the hill and arrested by the police as they were reading the Bill of Rights. They were released a few days later and the strike was won.

10 Bloody Thursday Monument. Pepper Tree Plaza, 6th and Harbor, San Pedro.

A plaque in this small square on the site of the Pepper Tree Saloon where seamen and longshoremen used to meet commemorates the six workers killed in the great maritime strike of 1934, which was centered in San Francisco and led by longshore leader Harry Bridges.

11 Strike Memorial. Southwest corner, B and Neptune, Wilmington.

A plaque here memorializes the two longshore workers, Richard Parker and John Knudsen, killed May 15, 1934 during the maritime strike in battles with police and strikebreakers. ILWU Local 13 remains one of the strongest unions in L.A.

Central Avenue and Black Labor

Central Avenue was the heart of the African-American community from about 1910 to the 1950s, the center of black political, social and economic life. The International Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters had its headquarters here. When they were organizing and had to meet in secret to avoid railroad spies, many Central Avenue families and churches offered them space.

The most militant of the black-owned newspapers was *The California Eagle*, owned by Charlotta Bass. In the 1930s, Mrs. Bass organized the Industrial Council to fight for the rights of workers under the slogan, "Don't spend your money where you cannot work." Not far south of the *Eagle's* office (4075 S. Central in the 1940s) was the Hugh Gordon Book Shop, a progressive black-owned bookstore managed by Adele Young, and the jazz district with the elegant Dunbar hotel at its center.

12 Dunbar Hotel. 4225 S. Central Avenue.

Virtually all of America's great jazz musicians stayed at this hotel in the heart of the Central Avenue jazz district when they came to play at legendary clubs such as the Alabam nearby. L.A.'s jazz musicians were represented by Local 767 of the American Federation of Musicians. In 1953 Buddy Collette and others managed to integrate this black local with Local 46 in Hollywood. This landmark struggle paved the way for integrating the AFM throughout the country.

13 Charlotta Bass Archive and Mural. Southern California Library for Social Studies and Research, 6120 S. Vermont Ave.

Charlotta Bass's papers are archived at this private social history library a couple of miles southwest of the old *Eagle* offices. A huge image of Charlotta Bass over the door welcomes visitors, the centerpiece of a mural by Eva Cockcroft honoring women and labor in L.A. Another mural, "Labor Solidarity Has No Borders" by Mike Alewitz, is on the north wall. The library contains many other archives of L.A. labor and social history.



Black and white workers sign protest against discrimination in retail hiring.



Strike supporter speaking at Liberty Hill, 1934

Collection of Art Almeida

Heavy Industry in Southeast L.A.

Beginning in the 1900s, southeast L.A. became a smokestack belt to rival any Midwest city. In the 1930s, this area saw the growth of huge plants from virtually all the major rubber, steel and auto companies. The CIO headquarters near Avalon and Slauson, the Steelworkers Organizing Committee, at USW Local 1845 in Huntington Park, and UAW Local 216 in South Gate were important centers of drives during the late 1930s to organize these plants.

Plant closures destroyed all this in the 1970s and 1980s, despite many determined community struggles to keep plants open. There is no longer a single major rubber, steel or auto plant in L.A.

14 CIO Headquarters. 5851 (now 5833) S. Avalon.

downtown. Now a warehouse. Look for the tower on the roof.

15 Uniroyal Rubber. 5701 Telegraph Rd., Commerce.

The magnificent facade, a mock Assyrian temple built by Samson Rubber in 1929, once housed the factory, but now fronts a designer outlet center called The Citadel.

16 UAW Local 216 Headquarters. 2809 Tweedy Boulevard, South Gate.

GM-South Gate on the south side of Tweedy was closed in 1982 and then bulldozed, but the union hall is now a retraining center. It was the center of a large struggle to save the plant and lobby for congressional bills to prevent plant closures.

17 Bethlehem Steel. Slauson and Maywood, Vernon.

The target of another large community struggle to keep the plant open. The struggle gave rise to a food bank and a workers' play "Lady Beth," written out of the experience of the workers and produced by Susan Tanner. Closed in 1982.

18 Ford. 8900 E. Washington, Pico-Rivera.

Closed in 1980 and the plant was rebuilt as Northrop's Stealth bomber plant, itself planning to close in 1997. Ford's first plant on 7th Street near downtown was moved to Terminal Island in the early 1930s, then production shifted to Maywood and Pico-Rivera in the 1940s and 1950s.

19 Chrysler. Slauson and Eastern, Commerce.

In 1939, 15 top leaders of UAW Local 230 here were indicted for conspiracy to "extort" union dues from "reluctant workers." They were ultimately acquitted, a landmark in defense of union rights. Closed in 1971. American Bridge, a major U.S. Steel factory was across the street.

20 L.A. County Federation of Labor. 2130 W. 9th St.

In 1959, the L.A. Central Labor Council (AFL) and the L.A. Council of the CIO merged. At the time they had 700,000 members, the largest labor council in the U.S.

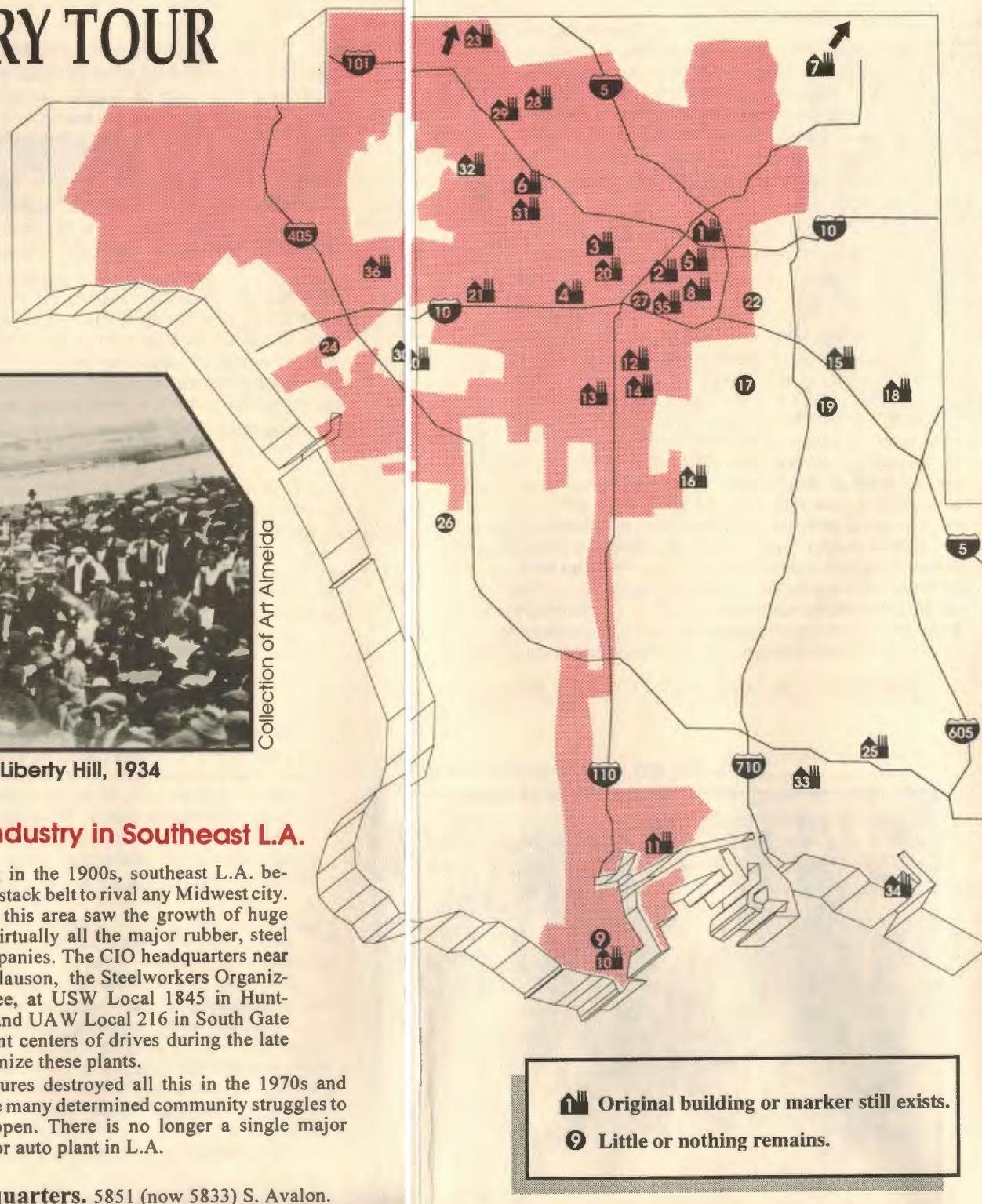
21 Labor Mural. On CWA Local 9000, 5855 Venice Blvd.

This mural entitled "An Injury to One Is an Injury to All" by Mike Alewitz was donated to the workers of L.A. by unions and individuals nationwide.



Sit-down at Douglas, 1937

Hearst Collection, USC Library



Original building or marker still exists.

Little or nothing remains.



Strikers at North American before the troops arrived, 1941

Hearst Collection, USC Library

26 North American. Aviation and Imperial.

When the UAW struck North American after winning an NLRB election in 1941, Franklin Roosevelt ordered the army to occupy the plant and stop the strike. This was also the site of a pivotal 54-day strike in 1953 by UAW Local 887 that was defeated and served to set back many union gains made during the Korean War. Though there are some North American (now Rockwell-owned) buildings here, the 1941 buildings were located where the Imperial Cargo Terminal now sits.

27 U.S. Employment Headquarters. 11th and Flower.

The labor shortages during World War II led many of the aircraft plants to open up to women. By 1943, there were 113,000 L.A. women in aircraft production, about 40% of the work force. In August 1942 a mass protest by African-American women at this building succeeded in opening many plant gates to black women. After the war, many women of all races were forced out of the plants to make room for returning GIs, and the UAW and IAM did little to prevent it.

Hollywood Studios and Labor

Few of the Hollywood studios were ever in Hollywood proper. They were and are scattered in communities from Burbank in the Valley to Culver City on the west side, communities that were populated not by stars and directors, but by studio hands, technicians and other film laborers. Unionization began with a 1926 master contract for carpenters, electricians and other film workers.

Hollywood wealth and glamor soon drew the interest

between the AFL's IATSE unions (International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees) and the CIO's more progressive Conference of Studio Unions, led by ex-boxer Herb Sorrell who opposed mob influence. After the World War II, jurisdictional disputes between IATSE and CSU became entangled with the first shots of the domestic Cold War and led to strikes as bitter as anything in the industrial Midwest. See below.

28 Disney Studios. Buena Vista and Riverside Drive, Burbank.

A successful nine-week strike by cartoonists here in 1941 led to the creation of the progressive Conference of Studio Unions.

L.A.

In the 1930s and 1940s Latino construction workers met here to demand entry to the white-led Laborers Union. They eventually become a majority of the union and took part in many militant strikes. A branch of the Committee for the Protection of the Foreign Born operated out of the same building.

29 GM-Van Nuys. 7900 Van Nuys Blvd., Van Nuys.

In the 1960s, L.A. was second only to Detroit in car production. By 1992 this last auto plant in L.A. closed. Across the street is UAW Local 645 headquarters, which waged a decade-long struggle to save the plant.

The Aerospace Industry

Aerospace is the only surviving heavy industry in L.A., which is the historic birthplace of almost all of America's great aircraft companies such as Douglas, Northrop, Lockheed and North American. During the rise of the CIO, several major battles were fought out in L.A. aircraft plants.

24 Douglas-Santa Monica. Donald Douglas Loop N., Santa Monica Airport.

The original Douglas plants, demolished in 1975 and now the site of the Museum of Flying, saw a major sit-down strike beginning February 23, 1937, inspired

by the great Flint sit-down in Michigan that had been won 12 days earlier. Police made mass arrests on February 25 to break the strike. After the arrests, Northrop workers in Inglewood evacuated their plant, and Northrop remains unorganized today.

25 McDonnell Douglas. Lakewood Boulevard and Carson, Long Beach.

This huge complex, opened in 1941 and organized in 1944, has been the site of many labor battles. UAW Local 148 here once had over 30,000 members, the second biggest UAW local in the country after Local 600 at Ford-River Rouge in Detroit.



The Battle of Warner Brothers

UCLA Library, Special Collections

29 The Battle of Warner Bros. Warner Blvd. and Olive Ave., Burbank.

The CSU struck Warners in the spring of 1945 despite a wartime ban on strikes. The strike dragged on for 30 weeks. On October 5, studio executives hurled nuts and bolts at strikers from the roof, the studio police used fire hoses and tear gas, and the workers overturned three cars in what came to be called "The Battle of Warner Brothers." The 1945 strike ended with "The Treaty of Beverly Hills" that provided mediation for the jurisdictional dispute, but mediation broke down.

30 MGM (Now Sony-Columbia.) 10202 W. Washington Blvd., Culver City.

This huge complex was the biggest studio of them all (claiming "more stars than there are in the heavens.") Strikes here in 1946 and 1947 continued the IATSE-CSU battle with the police dragging away sit-down protesters.